

MEDITATIONS, SACRED AND PROFANE

Meditation I

There is a remarkable moment in Bernard Shaw's play about Joan of Arc. In her trial for heresy, Joan is being interrogated by the prosecutor, an English bishop. He asks about the voices that instruct her and that she claims are messages from God. Joan describes how they just come into her mind. The Bishop sees it as an opening for his attack and asks, "So you imagined them!" Joan's response was, "of course I imagined them. That's how messages from God come. In the imagination." (Supply the accurate quote.)

The dialog demonstrates the two differing concepts of imagination. The more common of the two ideas is that imagination is a voluntary or involuntary mental construction, unrelated to reality. "It's only a figment of your imagination!" The more literal, though less common, understanding of imagination is that imagination is an intuitive perception of some reality and its assembly into a coherent vision. Literally, imagination is the construction of an image.

To say that some idea or event is "imagined" is risky, given that the image may fall into either of the two categories. Great discoveries in science have come from the "imagination" as the intuitive and sub-conscious perception of relationships. The opposite may also be the case. Sir Alexander Fleming is reported to have dreamed that he had discovered the fundamental "theory of everything." It was so important that he roused enough to make a note in a bedside notebook. Reading it, Fleming saw that he had written, "The universe smells vaguely of tinctured iodine."